

Short Guide to: Albania

Location: On the Balkan Peninsula in South and Southeast Europe. Its coastline faces the Adriatic Sea to the northwest and the Ionian Sea to the southwest along the Mediterranean Sea. It borders Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Greece.

Population: 2.8 million

Languages: Albanian (official) with dialects Tosk, spoken in the south, and Gheg, spoken in the north.

Major Religions: Albania is constitutionally a secular country since 1967. The former Communist dictatorship declared Albania as the world's first and only "Atheist state". Believers faced harsh punishments, and many clergymen were killed. Because of this, religious observance and practice is generally lax today, and polls have shown that, compared to the populations of other countries, few Albanians consider religion to be a dominant factor in their lives. Religion is separated from the public sphere and citizens show strong support for secularism. Some Islam and Christianity is practised.

Major Ethnic Groups: Albania is inhabited mostly by Albanians (83%). It recognises nine national minorities. These include Aromanians, Balkan Egyptians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Bosniaks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Roma.

History

Germany occupied Albania in WW2. The Albanian antifascist resistance was led by nationalist groups and later by the Communist Party. Albania was a communist state, although rather on its own as it broke ties with the USSR, was hostile to Yugoslavia, withdrew from the Warsaw Pact and had nothing to do with China. When the Soviet Union collapsed, followed by a big election defeat for the former communist Party of Labour of Albania in 1992, communism imploded, and with it the economy. Social unrest ensued.

The unstable economic situation led to a widespread Albanian diaspora, mostly to Italy, Greece, Switzerland, Germany and North America during the 1990s. The early years of the 21st century saw an improvement in the economic and political conditions enabling Albania to become a full member of NATO in 2009. The country has been accepted as a candidate to join the European Union.

Culture and Society

The Albanian diaspora is so vast that it is believed that the number of Albanians living outside Albania is greater than the country's population of nearly 3 million. Hundreds of thousands emigrated following the collapse of the communist regime in 1991 and ensuing economic crisis.

Very confusingly- Albanians nod when they mean "no" and shake their head when they mean "yes". Be careful answering questions with your head! In some Albanian regions, smiling freely at strangers is considered a little strange and sometimes impolite. Albanians tend to use more eye contact when they are speaking, but less when they are listening. It is believed that avoiding eye contact is the way to show respect. When Albanians place the hand on the chest it is to say- 'thank you'.

Poverty

Albania's transition from a communist regime to a free market in a democratic republic has disrupted economic growth and has caused high levels of poverty, making it one of the poorest in Europe. Progress- including privatising agriculture and construction, and liberalising prices, trade and foreign exchange has been made. The percent of Albanians below the poverty line has decreased dramatically, from around 25% in 2002 to less than half of that now. Most poverty is still in rural areas.

Trafficking

Human trafficking took hold in Albania following the collapse of communism in 1990, and the country has since become known as a source nation for people being kidnapped, smuggled and then sold. The Salvation Army in the UK says Albania is overwhelmingly the country from which they receive the highest number of people referred, mainly women. Their stories tell of organised crime and sexual exploitation. In 2017 there were 777 Albanian reported victims in the UK.